Exclusive Interviews With 3 Men Present at Hospital When JFK's Body Was Removed

- Justice of Peace
- Funeral Director
- Police Sergeant

All Say Manchester's Book Is Full of Shocking Errors

MANCHESTER

By JIM WHELAN

William Manchester's book, "The Death of a President," is a distorted, slanted, twisted account of events following the assassination of John F. Kennedy. It is riddled with misquotes, exaggerations and mistakes. In fact, the book is likely to mislead millions of readers.

That is not the judgment of The ENQUIRER. It is the judgment of three eyewitnesses who participated in events at Parkland Hospital after the tragedy in Dallas, Tex., on Nov. 22, 1963.

For in exclusive interviews with The ENQUIRER, all three have directly contradicted Manchester's version of those events. Those witnesses are:

- Judge Theron Ward, who approved the removal of the President's body prior to an autopsy.
- Funeral director Vernon Oneal, who provided the Kennedy coffin.
- And Police Sergeant Robert Dugger, the highest-ranking police officer at the hospital.

All three were present at Parkland before and during the removal of the dead President's body to Love Airfield for the flight back to Washington, D.C.

All three are prominently mentioned in Manchester's book, serialized in Look magazine, which purported to describe events at the hospital and the return flight. And all three now say that the Manchester version of the hospital drama is riddled with shocking errors.

Said Judge Ward: "It never dawned on me that this man was going to twist things around. If the rest of the book is like the article, he is as far off as a snowball in hell."

Said Oneal: "The man has exaggerated everything and misquoted everybody."

Said Dugger: "The story is slanted. Some of it I disagree with wholeheartedly."

These eyewitness statements are lengthening the shadows of doubt recently cast on the accuracy of Manchester's account.

His claim that Kennedy adviser Kenneth O'Donnell was not present at President Johnson's swearing-in ceremony aboard Air Force One that fateful afternoon has already been discredited.

O'Donnell himself said that he was standing at Mrs. Kennedy's side during the swearing-in.

A dramatic, official photo (right) of the oath-taking ceremony — clearly showing O'Donnell standing next to Mrs. Kennedy — has been circulated around the world.

Now, more grave doubts are being raised.

Manchester describes Lyndon B. Johnson's hurried departure from Parkland, followed by an alleged controversy at the hospital over the removal of Mr. Kennedy's body.

The body was removed, Manchester says, over the objections of the Dallas County Medical Examiner, who wanted either an immediate autopsy as prescribed by law, or a release signed by the appropriate authority. The account describes scuffling among officials — which witnesses say never took place.

It attributes unflattering statements and behavior to the judge, funeral director and police officer, which they deny.

The account then goes on to describe the Johnson oath-taking ceremony aboard the Presidential plane amid abrasive relations between Kennedy and Johnson aides.

Manchester also tells about the flight back to Washington aboard Air Force One, bearing the body of Mr. Kennedy, his newly sworn successor, their wives and their official parties. After reading Manchester's account, Judge Ward said flatly: "These are not the events as I remember them. I don't know where he (Manchester) got his information."

In his book, Manchester describes a heated argument between Kennedy aides who wanted to remove the body, and Dr. Earl Rose, the Dallas medical examiner, who suggested an immediate autopsy as prescribed by law in all murder cases.

Dr. George Burkley, the President's personal physician, sided with the aides, according to Manchester. And Judge Ward, a Justice of the Peace, was called in to resolve the dispute.

Manchester quotes Judge Ward as saying he could do nothing, but was obligated to order the autopsy if a homicide was suspected.

And he quotes the judge directly as saying: "This is just another homicide case as far as I'm concerned."

Judge Ward was flabbergasted when he read that. He told The ENQUIRER: "I never said it was just another homicide case. I didn't intend to hold the body, but I wanted to check a point of law. I said I would handle the matter as efficiently as I could.

"I released the body in the interests of the American people and not for the sake of any one person. In my mind, there was no decision to be made — I wasn't going to stand in the way of the President's body leaving."

At another point, Manchester says Judge Ward attempted "to take Dr. Burkley's arm." But "the arm was withdrawn."

But Judge Ward said: "Dr.

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CASKET ARRIVES: Vernon Oneal's hearse delivers JFK's casket to hospital.

WITNESS: Judge Theron Ward was an eyewitness to the controversial events outside Parkland Hospital.

O'DONNELL WAS THERE: Photo shows Kenneth O'Donnell (right) at Mrs. Kennedy's side as President Johnson takes oath of office. Photo circulated around the world refutes statement in Manchester's book that O'Donnell wasn't present.

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Burkley certainly didn't yank his arm away, as Manchester would have readers believe. I took Dr. Burkley's right hand and my left hand was on his right forearm in a sincere gesture."

Later on, Manchester describes "butting" and "pushing" as Kennedy aides wheeled the President's body out.

Manchester went on: "It looked as though they might have to hold more than one man down, and if the patrolman intervened actively he would be no pushover; he was fingering a pistol."

Judge Ward said: "The squabble that Manchester discussed wasn't a squabble at all. There wasn't even any discourtesy that I could see. They were all experiencing shock. There was a desire to resolve the problem. I didn't see anybody 'fingering a pistol.' The only physical thing I saw was the tragedy in the hearts and minds of the people there.

"I didn't think Manchester would set a circus stage with misquotes as he did in this article.

"I talked with him on the phone and recounted events to him as I have to you. I was told the information I gave this man would go into the archives of the United States. There was no indication of publication whatsoever."

Manchester described the judge as "short, slight, sandy-haired and young." Actually, Ward is 6 feet 1 inch tall, weighs 174 lbs. and had brown hair years ago. It's now turning gray.

The description prompted the judge to say: "I certainly would appreciate it if Manchester had gotten something right."

Oneal, the funeral director, said he was "shocked" by the inaccuracies he found in the Manchester book.

Manchester says Oneal "expressed concern over who would pay him" for the coffin he supplied.

"That is absolutely untrue," Oneal retorted angrily. "I never discussed price with a living human — not with a soul. I never asked any questions, in fact.

"At one point in the book, Manchester said 17 of my 18 employees were out to lunch when we got the call to supply a casket.

"That is absolutely untrue. I have a busy establishment in Dallas and not more than two or three of my employees ever go out to lunch at one time.

"He describes me as standing in my driveway, waiting for my men to get back from lunch. It's untrue. It never happened. I can't understand where he got that from."

In the operating room, where the President died, Manchester says that orderly David Sanders worked Jackie Kennedy's wedding ring over the President's knuckle with cream.

But Oneal said: "I put the ring on the President's finger myself. I got the grease myself, too.

"Another thing: Manchester said the casket had a satin lining. That's as wrong as wrong can be. It had the finest velvet lining that is put in a casket.

"Nobody tried to block the casket, as Manchester says. Mrs. Kennedy walked right beside the casket. She never got more than a foot away from it. There were no arguments."

Manchester describes Oneal's funeral home this way: "It had a wall-to-wall carpeted Slumber Room, piped religious music, a coffee bar for hungry relatives of loved ones."

In angry reply, Oneal said: "He painted me and my place like something out of Mars. Nearly every modern funeral home has carpeting. And we don't have a coffee bar to serve bereaved families. We serve coffee, but we don't have a stove or cook anything, as he'd have people believe."

Oneal added: "I've been here 34 years and I don't make it hard on anyone when it comes to money."

Sergeant Dugger, now retired from the Dallas police force, was appalled by Manchester's references to him.

The author says Dugger thought Dallas looked like a "hick town," and was ashamed to be a Texan because of the delay in permitting JFK's body to leave.

"I did not think Dallas was a hick town," Dugger said. "When Mrs. Kennedy said she had to get her husband's body back to Washington, I figured who was I to stop the President's wife?"

When the body was wheeled out of the hospital, Manchester says "the agents and Sergeant Dugger were pushing."

Dugger said: "That wasn't the case at all. I was at the head of the casket and I didn't touch or push anyone. I could see Dr. Rose's position and if he had tried to stop me I probably would have stopped.

"He did not try to physically stop us. He just stepped aside.

"It is true that the first time we started to move the body, Dr. Rose was highly excited.

"But there was no violence.

"I don't know where Manchester got that bit about a policeman 'fingering a pistol.'"

Dugger confirmed it was Oneal who put Jackie's ring on the President's finger — and not the orderly, as Manchester says.

"The Death of a President" won't be published in book form until later this spring. But some experts are already saying it will be a best seller. Others, however, are asking on what best-seller list — fiction or nonfiction.

OUTSIDE PARKLAND HOSPITAL: Secret Service man carries clothing from car (right) in which President Kennedy was shot. He is followed by Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry, as onlookers watch solemnly.

OPERATING ROOM where President Kennedy died.

DR. EARL ROSE

DAY OF THE MURDER: President applauds his wife at Fort Worth, Tex., Chamber of Commerce breakfast, only a few hours before he was killed.